

Gertrude Bussey

1888 - 1961

In a fireside talk to Goucher students in 1945 Gertrude Bussey, speaking of William Temple, closed with the following quotation from his writings: "I would rather that my intimate friends knew me as one who thought himself as nothing in comparison with the work he had to do than that they should know me as a great scholar or a great saint." We can see her in our mind's eye reading this passage approvingly. Her life so fully exemplified modesty, naturalness, simplicity and the lack of pretension. She was without any sense of a part to be played or a reputation to be sustained and completely devoid of any eagerness of self-reference. Her life was truly her work.

What was the secret of her buoyant spirit and matchless courage? To me it seems that a primary source of her power lay in her wholehearted commitment to philosophy conceived in the original sense of the love of wisdom. Love without reason is blind and can destroy its object. Reason without love is empty and substitutes abstract logic-chopping for the plenitude of reality. In her, reason and love were united in a harmonious personality able to release all her talents for useful work, unimpeded by corroding doubt, irrational fear or sentimentality.

We have only a few clues as to how her apprenticeship in philosophy began. After a preparatory schooling in Mt. Vernon, New York, she attended Barnard for a year and then moved to Wellesley where she concentrated in physics and chemistry. Then she came under the tutelage of Mary Whiton Calkins, a vigorous young professor of philosophy who was to become a renowned teacher and author. At the time a female philosopher was an all but unheard of phenomenon. The deep-going influence of this teacher and the adventure of breaking new paths for women must have been powerful incentives in calling her to follow a natural bent for philosophy. Teacher and student were drawn into a lasting bond of respect and affection which Miss Bussey expressed later by founding the Mary Whiton Calkins Fund at Goucher.

By Miss Calkins she was introduced to the reigning philosophical school of idealism. This many-faceted, expansive mode of thought, with sources as far back as Plato and the Christian Fathers, exercised a persuasive spell over the budding philosopher. The idea that the universe is an infinite creative whole of reason and spirit formed the mainstream of European humanism and had occupied the great philosophic minds of Germany from whence it was transplanted zealously to France, England, Italy, and America. One likes to think of her in the enthusiasm of youth and fresh discovery filled with the idea that God is an illimitable creative mind to whom man is kin by virtue of his possession of reason. "Freedom," she wrote, "is the watchword of idealism."

After a period of surrender to the romantic charm of this great speculative hypothesis, she began a painstaking critique of certain of the basic conceptions of idealistic philosophy. Her graduate study proceeded slowly because it was

interrupted by three years of teaching at Brantwood Hall in Bronxville, New York, where she taught, of all things, Latin, mathematics and psychology. But she found time amidst multifarious duties to compose under Miss Calkins' direction a translation of LaMettrie's Man a Machine, a work whose mechanistic interpretation of nature is completely at odds with idealism and its espousal of freedom. Accompanied by copious and meticulous notes, it was accepted at Wellesley for the master's degree and later published by the Open Court. In further pursuit of her philosophic interests, she attended courses at Columbia where she heard the lectures of W. P. Montague, John Dewey, Felix Adler, and a special series by Henri Bergson. She then matriculated at Northwestern University where she was awarded her doctorate with a thesis entitled "Typical Recent Conceptions of Freedom."

After coming to Goucher in 1915 as an instructor in philosophy she progressed by 1921 to a full professorship and the chairmanship of the department which she guided until her retirement in 1953. She delighted in recalling with a characteristic ripple of amusement that when upon arriving at Goucher she inquired of Dr. Lilian Welsh how one could handle a required class of forty students in philosophy, the redoubtable Lilian fortified her with the remark: "I hope you don't make a mess of it." The period until the middle 1930's was marked by her growth as a teacher and further study at Oxford. The six articles which she published in philosophical journals during these years reveal that she persisted in searching the literature of recent idealism for a philosophical foundation of human freedom. An exception is the last article on "Religion and Truth" in which she sympathetically examined the claims of humanism as a growing religion. She deplored the "idols of false belief" as well as the tendency to compartmentalize religion as a separate kind of truth. She held firmly to the idea that truth is one and indivisible. In reflecting on philosophy as a guide to truth in religion she concluded that it could not yet furnish conceptions which insured a firm foundation for religious belief. She never abandoned the conviction that faith and reason can and should walk hand in hand. The search continued for the remainder of her life. It calls to mind the great closing passage of Spinoza's Ethics:

"For if salvation lay ready at hand and could be discovered without great labour, how could it be possible that it should be neglected almost by everybody? But all noble things are as difficult as they are rare."

While she never abandoned philosophical idealism, she held it at the close of her life only with many reservations as something not fully articulated, an appealing intuition too vast and too deep to be revealed fully in logical discourse.

Although she found that philosophy is a continuing pursuit and that final answers are not ready at hand, she had few doubts or reservations about the practical bearings of her philosophical and religious convictions. Her life as well as her social philosophy were guided by three basic and controlling ideas: justice, peace and freedom, and the greatest of these was freedom. Her supreme faith

in freedom is borne out by the record of her life, and it was the recurring theme of her philosophical writings. She proceeded always on the assumption that freedom is the only method by which lasting justice and peace can be attained.

Her interest in the problem of securing a lasting peace through disarmament and pacifism has already been spoken of. This was of a piece with her life-long concern for economic and social justice, her work in behalf of industrial democracy on Christian principles, her unabating interest in racial equality, her stout defense of civil liberties, her zeal for the advancement of opportunities for women, and her manifest concern for a living and socially active Christian faith and life. She knew what it was to commit herself unreservedly to unpopular causes, to remain unswayed by popular clamor, to be steadfast in the face of heavy pressures and public scorn. She followed the advice of Ralph Waldo Emerson when he wrote:

"Obey thy heart;
Friends, kindred, days,
Estate, good fame,
Plans, credit and the Muse -
Nothing refuse."

In her defense of liberty there was never a trace of self-righteousness, of rancor or of personal animosity. Her quick sense of justice, which she applied disinterestedly to herself, to her friends and all others left her destitute of any such motives. She was as magnanimous in her appraisal of persons as she was sharp in her judgment of issues. The College and the Baltimore community has not had in our time a more courageous or a more astute champion of liberty than Gertrude Bussey.

By her friends at Goucher she was respected and loved as a teacher, colleague and elder statesman who brought a lively intelligence, good humor and wisdom to our deliberations. The esteem in which she was held was attested time and time again by her election to the most responsible faculty offices in the College. Everyone trusted in her fairness and objectivity. Hers was a wonderfully leavening influence on the lumps of inertia and humbug that appear occasionally in college life as in other human affairs. Her spontaneous chuckle, coming as if from the very soul of her, often pointed up the comic side of committee entanglements or special pleading, thus clearing the air and setting the discussion on a profitable course again. In faculty discussions she had a gift for going to the heart of the question.

Her unique contributions to the College and to the community brought her many honors which she received graciously and with sincere humility but with a trace also of incredulity and embarrassment. It was not in her to undertake any kind of work with the thought of rewards or to satisfy personal ambitions.

The lot of a professor of philosophy is not an easy one. To discourse on first and last things every Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday at eleven o'clock to a class of diffident undergraduates can be very taxing. The power of Miss Bussey's teaching lay in her own insatiable intellectual curiosity and contagious enthusiasm for learning. She was herself always searching, and she communicated the spirit of the pursuit to her students. Teaching in a field where high levels of turgidity are tolerated and where unintelligibility is often mistaken for profundity, she insisted on clarity, on clear, simple, terse language without recourse to eloquence or afflatus. She was not one to believe that the truth has anything to do with solemnity. Her keen sense of humor and instinctive aversion to sham invariably cleared the way for a reasonable approach to every question.

She was in the fullest sense of the word in thought and in deed a lover of knowledge and wisdom, following as all true practitioners of philosophy must, the example of the incomparable Socrates, the prototype and patron saint of philosophy. In the society of other scholars she enjoyed reflection and the life of the mind for its own sake. But scholarship alone did not suffice. Knowledge and reflection were for her a preparation, not an end point. And so also was religious faith. The harvest of her inward joy and the peace that she gathered in her faith in God and in his saving Grace she had to share with others, the humble and the exalted alike. And so she gave herself and her special talents as a teacher, guide, speaker and leader unstintingly. Her varied and many-sided activities had in common a concern for the fullest development of the resources of individuals under the guidance of reason and the Christian ideal of life.

This was Gertrude Bussey as I knew her. To know her was to love her and to bask in the love which she had to give in such unbounded measure. In the words of Robert Frost's "A Prayer in Spring":

For this is love and nothing else is love,
The which it is reserved for God above
To sanctify to what far ends He will,
But which it only needs that we fulfill.

Otto F. Kraushaar

Goucher College
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